

Elmwood
Essex County
Virginia

HABS No. VA 323

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PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORIC AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA
District of Virginia

Historic American Buildings Survey

Prepared at Washington Office

ELMWOOD
Essex County, Virginia

Owner: Mrs. J. Clayton Mitchell

Date of erection: c. 1770

Builder-owner: James Mercer Garnett

Architect: Unknown; said to have been a Fredericksburg man

Present condition: Fair

Description:

The house is the largest single block in Virginia, measuring exactly one hundred feet in length. It is only a single row of rooms in depth, however, so that the first floor has only four rooms and a hall. The building is of brick laid in Flemish bond with a gauged and moulded water table, a gauged string course, and gauged flat arches over the openings. The arches are of unusual depth and elaboration of jointing. The facade is treated with a center pavilion, the lower part of which once had a porch, now missing. The door is within a simple masonry opening flanked by two narrow windows. Above there is a Palladian window, the center of which opened onto the roof of the porch, perhaps due to an alteration. The pediment of the pavilion is open to allow the window to extend into the tympanum. Beyond the pavilion there are four windows on either side of the facade, though the area to the left is obscured by the addition of a Victorian stair tower. At the time this was added, in 1852, all of the window sash was changed from six-over-six-light to four-over-four.

The side elevations have simply a pair of windows and an access door. The rear elevation is an unbroken wall of eleven bays and until recently had a long one-story plain porch, the columns of which are now in the basement of the house.*

The interior has some notable woodwork though it has suffered from the nineteenth-century changes. In plan there is a broad central hall with short longitudinal halls across the front. Behind these are the library and the reception room. At the west end there is a large drawing room extending the full width of the building. The dining room at the east is reduced in length by an entry and pantry. This latter room is entirely trimmed in the Victorian style and is undistinguished.

The entrance hall has arches in the side walls opening into

*Later information indicates that these were from the front porch, which was Doric. The rear porch had square columns.

the lateral halls. These arches have fluted Doric piers from which paneled archivolts spring. The cornice of the hall is a Doric entablature with triglyphs and mutules and medallions in the metopes.

In the reception room is the most scholarly woodwork of the house, the focal feature being the paneled chimney breast. The fireplace opening has a marble facing against which a carved backband with crossettes is placed. This supports a pair of carved brackets, which in turn support a cornice-type mantel shelf, richly moulded and carved. The fascia is carved with a Greek-key pattern and the bed mould with an egg-and-dart member above a dentil band. The overmantel is formed by an architrave with crossettes framing a flat sheathed panel. The fascia of the architrave is enriched with strapwork. Above the panel is a pulvinated frieze on which rests a broken pediment. Flanking the center motive are applied painted and gilt Victorian panels. The cornice of the room has scrolled modillions and a dentil course. There is a moulded dado with painted panels below the plastered walls.

From the reception room a door with a paneled reveal leads into the drawing room, which is fully paneled above a sheathed dado. The panels are as broad as each wall space and are moulded and beveled. The chimney breast has considerable projection and is exceptionally wide. The mantel is Victorian and the space just above is refinished where the original mantel was removed. The overmantel is intact and has a center panel somewhat similar to that in the reception room, but it is flanked by diminutive Ionic pilasters. These receive the ends of a full entablature that traverses the head of the center panel and over which a broken serpentine pediment occurs. There are two doors in the chimney wall, trimmed with Ionic pilasters supporting a pediment similar in design to that of the overmantel but larger in scale. The doors themselves are nineteenth-century. The main cornice is modillioned, the brackets having some carving. In the bed mould is a Wall of Troy dentil course, and the fascia is enriched with a double fret. These two motives are reproduced at smaller scale in the overmantel.

In the library the dado as well as the wall above is paneled. The base and chair rail are fully moulded in the form of a classic pedestal. The cornice lacks modillions but has a decorative course introduced instead in the form of arched brackets which create a sort of arched corbel table. In the bed mould is a Wall of Troy dentil band.

Originally there was a stair in the east lateral hall. The exact arrangement of it is not known, but in the attic is a derelict baluster from the stairs. This is of the typical Virginia design with a long turned shaft above a short vase below. Also preserved are many of the original sashes of the house. The muntins are double moulded with a cove (next the glass) and an ovolo. The

sash for the Palladian window has interlacing muntins in the head of all three openings.

The original woodwork has entirely disappeared from the second floor except in the room above the library. This has a paneled overmantel with the characteristic small squares of the region. There is a narrow modillioned cornice.

The remains of the great south parterre are noteworthy. Many rare shrubs still survive in spite of the many years the garden has lain fallow.

Approved:

Thomas Waterman

Date:

May 14, 1941